

Immortal and Ageless: Artemis in a Fresco from Akrotiri, Thera

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For much of the Aegean Late Bronze Age, our knowledge of religion suffers from a disconnection between literary and visual sources: we have texts that name divinities but no images. Or we have images but no explanatory texts. Scholars have been reluctant to identify specific Bronze Age divinities from the visual sources alone. A fresco from the upper floor of Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, Thera, may provide an exception to the general rule. The figure of a large woman enthroned at the highest stage of an architectural platform, heraldically flanked by a blue monkey and a leashed griffin, has been accepted by most scholars as a “goddess of nature.” She is the most elaborately bejeweled and costumed individual in Aegean art. She presides over a mountainous landscape where prepubescent girls gather saffron crocus flowers and present them to her, along with the monkey. The goddess wears a robe open at the chest to reveal the rounded breasts of a young adult woman (compare the similar figures in the Lustral Basin fresco from Xeste 3). But she wears the distinctive short, calf-length robe of a prepubescent girl under her ceremonial apron. Adults, by contrast, wear an ankle-length robe. Our figure thus conflates traits of youth and age, and bridges the transition from childhood to adulthood. Her mountainous setting, her role as mistress of animals, and the young attendant girls conform with aspects of Artemis known from historical times, and from her attested name in oblique cases in Linear B (PY Es 646).